
HUME ON THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

Text source:

Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion,
part 10-11

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

- The traditional problem of evil comes in the form of a challenge to the traditional western theistic belief in an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good God. The challenge is to reconcile the following four claims:
 1. There exists a God that is **omnipotent** (all-powerful).
(So He should be able to prevent evil.)
 2. That God is also **omniscient** (all-knowing).
(So He should know about evil if any is occurring.)
 3. That God is also **omnibenevolent** (all-good).
(So He should want to prevent evil from occurring.)
 4. Evil exists in the world.
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To be extra-provocative we can turn this tension into an argument for the non-existence of God:

1. An omniscient God would *know* that there is evil in the world (e.g. suffering).
2. An omnipotent God would *be able to prevent* there being evil in the world.
3. An omnibenevolent God would *want to prevent* there being evil in the world.
4. But there *is* evil in the world!

Therefore: 5. There *cannot* be an omniscient, omnipotent and omnibenevolent God.

Manicheanism:

This early A.D. religion accepts the existence of two warring supernatural powers locked in an eternal struggle, one good, one evil.

Manicheans worship the good power, but it *isn't* omnipotent: its unable to defeat the evil power completely.

[St Augustine was a Manichean before converting to Christianity, and spent much of his subsequent writings attacking it.]

TWO TYPES OF EVIL

It is important to note that there are two very different phenomena that fall under the umbrella term ‘evil’. Each sort of phenomenon raises a version the problem of evil.

- There may well be different responses to the problem of evil depending on which sort we focus on.

 - **1. Moral evil**
 - This covers “the evil that men do”: sin, wrongdoing, immoral behavior, plus the suffering this may cause others.

 - **2. Natural evil**
 - This covers the suffering, pain and misery caused by natural phenomena outside of human action: for instance, disease & cancer, certain famines, earthquakes, mudslides, tornados, volcanic eruptions etc etc...
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POSSIBLE RESPONSES TO THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

- (1) There isn't *that* much evil in the world.** The suffering in the world is outweighed (or at least equaled by) the happiness in the world.
(This defense is often married to the claim that a life of bliss awaits us after this very brief earthly life of pain and suffering.)
- (2) Evil isn't really anything positive in the world. Its just an *absence* of good.** So there nothing *positively* nasty that God has inflicted on us.
- (3) Without evil there would be no good.** You *have* to have one in order to have the other.
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POSSIBLE RESPONSES (*cont.*)

(4) The existence of some evil somehow makes available *more* good that wasn't otherwise accessible.

(5) The 'Free Will Defense'. Moral evil at least can be explained away, because God gave us free will (which was the most benevolent thing He could have done) and we then misuse it.

(6) We are just too puny to comprehend God's ways. But we can trust that his benevolence can somehow be squared with the existence of famines & plagues etc... -- its just that wee mortals cannot see how. ***"Judge not the Lord thy God!"*** (See *The Book of Job* etc.)

HUME'S ATTITUDE TO THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

Hume doesn't press the problem of evil in its strongest form as an argument for the non-existence of God.

He says that, if you *already* have good reasons to believe in the existence of an omni-God, then the existence of evil needn't disprove His existence, since you can always appeal to your own ignorance before the mysteries of God's behavior:

“such a limited intelligence [as a human's] must be sensible of his own blindness and ignorance, and must allow that there may be many solutions of these phenomena which will forever escape his own comprehension.” (DCNR part 11 para. 2)

HUME'S ATTITUDE TO THE PROBLEM OF EVIL (*Continued*)

But he stresses that, if you are *don't* already have such good reasons to believe in an omni-God, and are trying to *infer* the existence of such a being from observing his Creation, the situation is quite different.

“But supposing, which is the real case with regard to man, that [a being experiencing the world] is not antecedently convinced of a supreme intelligence, benevolent and powerful, but is left to gather such a belief from the appearance of things; this entirely alters the case, nor will he ever find any reason for such a conclusion. ...

“Is the world considered in general, and as it appears to us in this life, different from what a man ... would, beforehand, expect from a very powerful, wise, and benevolent Deity? ... however consistent the world may be, allowing certain suppositions and conjectures, with the idea of such a Deity, it can never afford us an inference concerning his existence. The consistency is not absolutely denied, only the inference.” (DCNR, part 11, para. 2, 4)

DOES HUME ALSO INTEND A SUBTLER POINT?

- ***“Judge not the Lord thy God!”* sounds good in the context of the problem of evil.**
 - **But if we adopt it literally across the board, how can we ever praise Him or meaningfully declare Him good, wise, powerful or whatever?** If we don't judge him *at all*, we are left with Demea's utterly unknown and unintelligible being, which is little better than atheism.
 - **So perhaps Hume is pointing to a possible double standard in the theist's position:**
 - The charge is that the theist is happy claiming that we can understand the Deity (at least in part) whenever we seem to have proved something positive about Him, but then claims that we can't understand God whenever we seem to have proved something negative about Him.
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